

Clerks

BY JAMES OPPENHEIM

THAT particular day began in the most ordinary way for Edward Ferguson—Young Ferg, as they called him at the office—a quite usual dark winter morning. Olson, who owned the two-family house and lived on the first floor, had not yet started the hot-water heater, and when, at 6.20, the alarm-clock went off and Eddy snatched it from the chair beside him and stuffed it under his pillow, Frances slipped out savagely on a floor that felt like ice and into air that was freezingly bitter.

"I'll light the stove," she gasped, inserting her naked feet into slippers and thrusting on a pink wrapper. "Now, Ed, don't fall asleep."

She dashed from the room which gave directly into the kitchen, and stood with teeth clicking as she lit the stove. She was not tall, but she was lissome, able-bodied, with a dark, thin face very expressive at the eyes and lips. Eddy came out, gray with fatigue.

"Brrr!" muttered Frances. "I think it's colder in here than outdoors."

He entered the bath-room and took out his shaving apparatus; the clear water was burning-cold. Frances appeared in the doorway.

"The milk's frozen—look."

She held up the bottle, from the neck of which the frozen cream protruded like a jack-in-the-box.

"I'll heat some water for you, Ed."

"Haven't time!" he muttered. "Get the breakfast."

Ten minutes later they drank hot coffee and ate hot oatmeal. The radiator began to thump.

"I suppose," said Frances, sarcastically, "the letter-carrier will get here around noon. Lord, I'm dying of the excitement."

They rose, and, while he muffled his throat and got his coat and hat, she strode to the window, shuddering.

"This place," she said, "is as lonesome as a toothache."

She breathed on the frosted pane, rubbed a spot clean, and peered through on the shabby hill-perched suburb, the mean, poverty-stricken frame houses, the narrow lamp-lit streets, the naked trees.

"Nothing but dogs here," she muttered, "human or the other kind. Say, Ed, supposin' you'd listen to me once in a while."

He stood ready, a sallow, lanky, silent fellow, stoop-shouldered by years of desk-work. His face was muscular in its leanness, his eyes a sad brown, his hair stiffly hung over his high, narrow forehead. Evidently he was too morose to listen to her complaints. Suddenly she turned, crossed the room in a strange, impulsive way, almost dancing savagely, flung her arms about his neck, kissed him—then drew back her head and exclaimed, fiercely:

"My God! why doesn't it thrill me any more when you put your arms around me?"

He was startled, smiled grimly. Gently he released himself.

"I've got to hurry, Fran!"

"I wish," she said, tearfully, "your old building would burn up!"

He went down the stairs, and cut across the empty lot, avoiding little patches of ice, in a wintry gray world still spotted with street lights. The suburb was beyond the city limits, and the trolley-line had here its lonely terminal. A lighted car was waiting on Jerome Avenue, and the motorman and conductor were inside, with shut doors, swinging their arms and dancing up and down. Eddy got in, but was likewise too cold to sit down.

He stood, moodily passing weather-words with the conductor, down a twenty-minute stretch of bleak Bronx bareness. Laborers got on, numbers brought the illusion of warmth, but at 166th Street Eddy had to change cars, waiting six long minutes at the open corner for a



"SUPPOSIN' YOU'D LISTEN TO ME ONCE IN A WHILE"

trolley that bore him crosstown, over High Bridge and on to Manhattan Island. Here he purchased a newspaper, and went down into the earth to the warmth of the Subway, and in the crowded, brilliant car he relaxed, and read news, and was hurled under thousands of people eating breakfast.

He was borne nearly the length of the

island, getting stiffly out at Wall Street, and emerging suddenly small in the bottom of that high region. The skyscraper cañon of Broadway was still gray and cruelly wind-swept, and a crowd of stenographers and clerks hurried along the pavements and into the doorways. Between two tall modern towers stood the express company's five-

story building—old, brownstone, faded, but brilliantly gas-lit. A throng of men tramped across the sawdust of the first floor and up the tall stairway; Eddy was one of them. Each landing absorbed a stream of these; Eddy climbed two flights.

He pushed open a dim glass door, and entered a middle office, with dark air-shaft window and gas-jets burning. Steam-heat bubbled joyously from a radiator, and the room smelt strongly of mop and the brown slop-water of the scrub-women. Eddy took off coat and hat, carefully placed them in a wooden wardrobe, pulled out a bunch of keys, unlocked a roll-top desk, rolled back the cover, and then stood in a dream.

One fierce thought was uppermost: he had gone through this whole morning process for exactly nine years, day after dull day, just as precise and unfailing as his alarm-clock, and he hated it with his heart and soul. He *hated it*.

For Eddy only lived two weeks out of the year. For fifty weeks he was a machine; for two fierce summer weeks he was that mystery, himself. That strange fellow who discarded linen collar, polished shoes, necktie, and all decency, and went, in corduroy and woolen, gun in hand, a free man in the Canadian wilderness; a silent man, with nostrils breathing balsam, with heart leaping, tracking the moose in trails beyond the Subway; where a newspaper's best use was to wrap up a cold lunch, where a clerk ceased to be an ink-stained cipher and became a careless god for whom the earth and the heavens were spread.

The anemic, smart-dressed young fellows could never have divined the wild streak in Young Ferg. They disliked his silence, being very voluble themselves. In fact, a group of these undersized and flabby young men now entered, quenching cigarettes against the desks, striking folded-arm and leg-crossed attitudes toward one another, and with nimble gaiety passing wit on the Big Three of Clerkdom—gambling, whiskey, and women.

"Gee! but she was a pippin!—how about it?"

"Did y' hear? Brant's got in bad on B. & F. margin. The loan-shark for him!"

"Here comes Bradsley; drunk again."

Bradsley was chief clerk of the tariff department; fifty men were dominated by his corner-desk in the rear room; but he was foggy and groggy with liquor, and his son Tom, a pale young fellow, was shamed for his father before them all.

"'Lo, Ferg," said Bradsley, groping past the dreaming clerk; "how's yer dad?"

"Not down yet," muttered Eddy.

But just then Eddy's father came in, in his light, tripping way, hopping almost like a bird, with head cocked to one side—a dry, dry little man, threadbare, with little grizzled beard and fluffy white hair, and pulpy, colorless face. His bright, small eyes were bloodshot; he had a nervous habit of rubbing his hands together, hands ineradicably stained with record ink.

Openly Eddy tolerated his father; secretly he despised him. "He has the soul of a slave, he's a cog. Nine years," he thought, darkly, "I've been like him; but he's been at it forty-four—"

And suddenly he saw himself clerking on and on for thirty-five more years, and gradually turning into this dry little thing, his skull stuffed with tariff schedules, his fingers black with ink, running his pen through his hair, whenever he was puzzled. Why, having squeezed all the humanness out of himself, had his father forced Eddy at fourteen to go clerking likewise? Poor automaton, thought Eddy, bitterly, so meagerly educated that he plopped at every stranger this revelation of genius in the family: "I have a daughter, sir, who can play things right off—by ear!"

They called him Old Ferg; he was a fixture in the business; he would be here to-day, to-morrow, and then again on Monday morning. Carefully reaching his coat over a nail, he turned to Eddy and spoke perfunctorily:

"How's Frances?"

"Oh, all right!"

"No more tricks lately? Eh? Eh?"

He rubbed his hands and loosed a thin cackle.

"Oh no."

They were silent a moment, both puzzled about women. Only a week ago Frances had done an amazing thing—no less than to have Olson lug the parlor furniture down into the empty lot,

where, against his terrified protests, she had set fire to the heap. Eddy, coming home, had been struck stock-still by the wild sight in the December evening, the leaping flames, and the sudden revealing of a woman strange to him; a wild creature, crouching, hair loosened in wind, flame-lit eyes dilated, lips parted; living as she hadn't lived for years.

"But that is our furniture," he had said to her, mechanically. It was too astounding to believe.

"I couldn't stand them any longer, Eddy," she had cried, fiercely, and yet with strange exultation; "I've seen them too long."

And he could not be angered. She was burning up the barren years. If only, as she had said, the express company building itself would burn up! If only she could set match to it! That night—after the bonfire—he had found her newly beautiful and alluring; a fresh passion went into their tamed love, a gust of joy, and Eddy had grown tender with pity. Dimly he realized what it meant to his wife to remain childless, to have an empty house and vacant heart—to brood all day over a discontented clerk who did not thrill her when he embraced her. But how could they maintain children on a salary of twenty dollars a week? Ought he to give up his two-weeks' hunting trip—that is, give up his real *life*?

He noticed his father opening his desk. That reminded him of family courtesies.

"How are the folks?" he asked.

Old Ferg spoke lightly: "Mother expects you and Frances over Sunday to dinner. She's ordered a two-rib roast. *She's* all right; but I guess I'm a bit upset."

"What's the matter?" asked Eddy, carelessly, sitting down and pulling out a bunch of printed tariff sheets.

"Pain in back of my head."

Had Eddy been listening, this statement would have seemed strange; but he was not. His father sat down, a large ledger open at his right, loose sheets at his left, and a blotter spread before him. This blotter was simply crusted with ink-spots. The old clerk set a pen between his teeth, then suddenly grabbed it, stuck it into the well, lifted it, slung off a flash of ink on the

blotter, leaned to the right, and wrote. Each dip in the ink-well repeated this process. The machine, which had run smoothly for years, and would doubtless run on for years more, had begun its day's work.

Now a gong sounded; idle clerks scurried to desks; hands arranged papers; and over all the five floors of the building an army of pen-points began the march of their measureless routine across the clock-paced hours. Inevitable this: a host of grown men submitting to child's work long drawn out, work that wore the nerves raw, so that at night they craved strong drink, the game of chance, and the dive-met woman.

Eddy knew why they did it, even as he knew why he did it. The public schools had made them too respectable for manual work, and unfit for anything else. That was it! Genteel! genteel! That was the word that directed their lives, that kept them from sinking into the "working class," down among the people who are honestly poor, who make no pretense of prosperity; that made them cling like a faded fringe to the dust-dragged skirt of the middle class—a faded fringe, with manicured nails, shaved and perfumed face, smart clothes, a "flat," not a "tenement," and a general veneer to hide their bitter poverty. What was the future for them? Look at Old Ferg at sixty, getting forty dollars a week!

An icy sleet smote the rear windows behind Bradsley's desk; wind howled down the air-shaft; but the steam bubbled through the radiator-valve, and Eddy and his father, side by side, worlds apart, toiled busily in the ever-increasing warmth. Illimitable time seemed to engulf them, broken only—at 10.30—by cheerful Howard, secretary to the Traffic Manager, a robust young Westerner. He tapped Old Ferg on the shoulder.

"What should the rate on fourth class be, Chitiwa to Greensdale?"

Old Ferg leaped up, still the automaton, thumbing off each phrase on his right-hand fingers.

"If," Eddy heard dimly, "the rate from Chitiwa to Paxley is forty-three cents, then Chitiwa to Greensdale ought to be forty-five. The Interstate Commerce Commission . . ."

It seemed endless, but at last Howard



THE MACHINE, WHICH HAD RUN SMOOTHLY FOR YEARS, HAD BEGUN ITS DAY'S WORK

went, and illimitable time engulfed them again.

The sleet smote, the radiator bubbled, the pens scratched. Then queerly, without warning, there came a hitch, as if an earthquake had swallowed the building. It was only Old Ferg uttering one syllable, but it held something so startlingly intimate and unbusinesslike that Eddy felt the blood leave his cheeks. His father had merely cried, low: "*Ed!*"

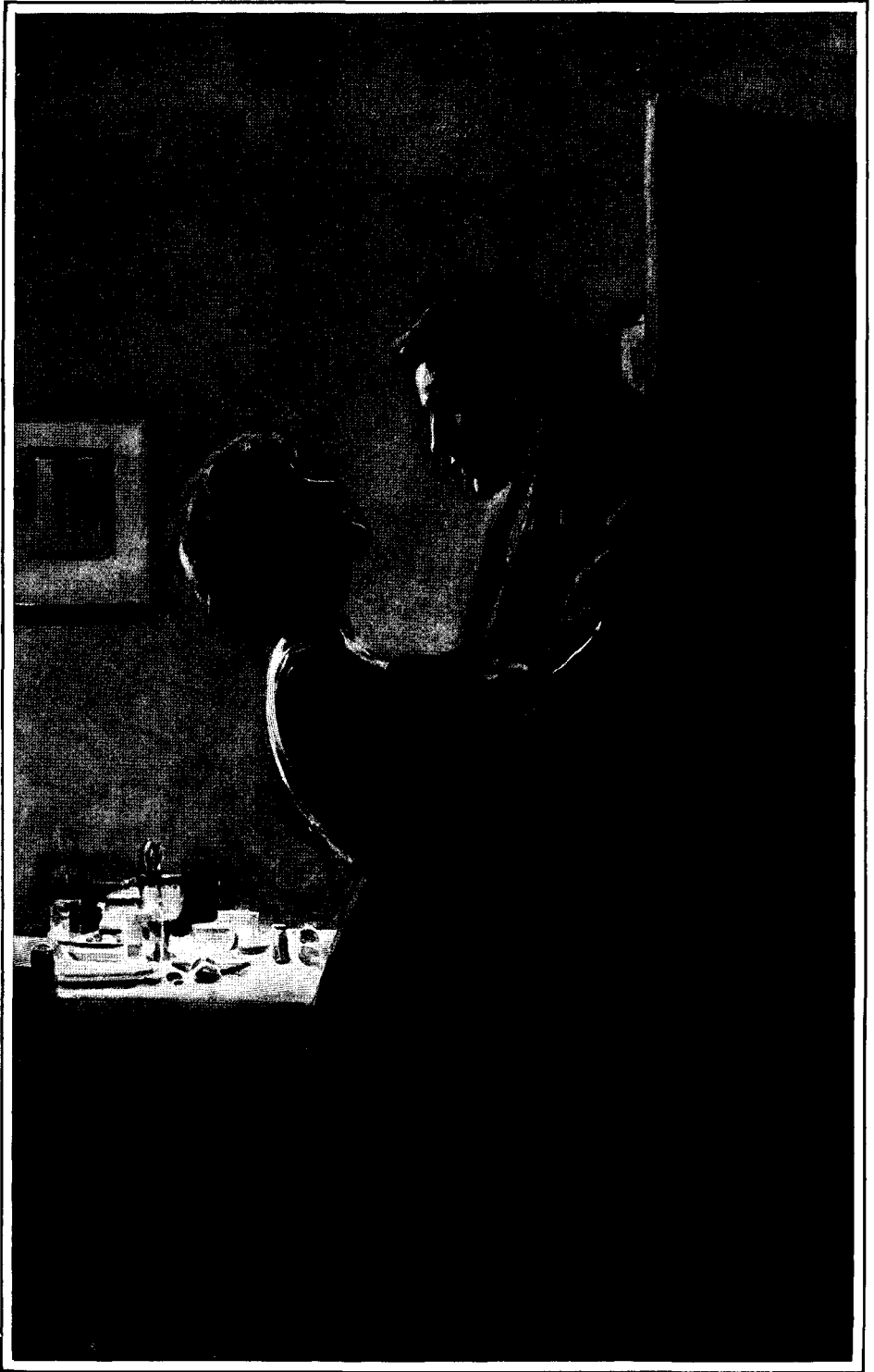
He wheeled, looked sharply. The pen dropped from his father's hand, and slowly the wizened clerk crumpled in his chair, face purple. The convulsed hands seized the chair-arms. Eddy felt his own feet fastened to the floor; he could not rise for a moment.

"What's happened?" he muttered. "Look—look out!"

He expected his father to go into convulsions, and tried to hold him back with words. The old clerk gasped:

"My head—fetch me home, Eddy."

The "Eddy" brought an unexpected, bitter sob to Eddy's throat. Clenching his fists, he leaped up, confused. And a thrill went subtly over the third floor, the human drama halted the army of pen-points, clerks began to rise here and there, there was a crowding in, a startled whispering, "It's Old Ferg! He's got a stroke!" Only half-drunken Bradsley acted, first forcing a pocket-flask between the clenched teeth, then sending some one to 'phone for a taxicab.



Drawn by John A. Williams

"YOU MEAN WE'LL—LEAVE HERE—GO WEST?"

The flabby faces suddenly became intensely human, tariffs and schedules were struck underfoot, and a lovely girdle of grief and exaltation was put about the old clerk. It was: "Eddy, get him home. . . . Eddy, get a specialist . . . Eddy," this and that.

The silent son had taken on new manhood in that place.

Old Ferg smiled back at their eager remarks—"How d'yer feel? Better, eh? You're all right! It 'll soon pass. See you Monday." But they did not fool him. As four lifted him up, "Good-by," he murmured, "good-by."

In a flash his meaning to the office became apparent: the fact that he was the future of these young men; that this was life—for them. Some of them cried strangely as he was borne away. The machine had run down after forty-four years of service. Old Ferg's clerkship was over.

As the taxi fled up the sky-scraper cañon and over Brooklyn Bridge, softly bumping, sleet streaking and dimming the windows and the icy wind breathing sharply through the door-cracks, Eddy held his father in his arms, and neither spoke. Pity and love for the poor thing swelled his heart. What a life! What an end to it all! This poor, worn-out drudge, whose grizzled beard tickled his fingers. What was it all for? Just that tariffs and schedules in intricate thousands might die in that head? Poor, worn-out clerk!

They were in Brooklyn: up the mean back street in the tiny frame house the stout mother, the unmarried sister who played tunes right off, were waiting. The wheels grated against the curb, the chauffeur, dripping ice, jerked the door open, and sleet fell with his words: "Want to come quick!"

Swiftly they bore him, slipping on icy pavement, and up ice-sheathed steps. The chauffeur rang the bell. They waited, and the stricken man groaned. And Eddy felt faint: for the door opened on a crack; it was his mother.

"Mother, dad . . ." he began.

"John!" she shrieked.

The dim, familiar bedroom, with center-jet burning low, double bed, and

threadbare furniture, had become strange and new to Eddy. He sat in a dark corner. The windows shook and rattled, wind whistled in the chimney, and spurts of smoke came through the open register. The doctor had been leaning over the bed. Eddy could only see the humped covers over his father's feet. The doctor rose, turned softly, and nodded. Eddy knew what it meant. He pulled out his watch, and saw the time clearly: it was seven minutes after six. He rose gently, and tiptoed across the room.

"Yes," whispered the doctor, "it's over."

"Tell my mother," said Eddy, quietly.

The doctor stepped out. Eddy was alone. He leaned over the bed. This was his father, and yet not his father. He was amazed that he had felt pity before. Suddenly his heart was lifted with awe and reverence. Whence came this majesty to the face? Was it possible that his wizened father had carried about with him, under schedules and ink-stains, something marvelous and benign? Had his son never known him? Was there not something great in an old clerk slipping away from his desk and the measured hours to go on this impossibly wild adventure?

He looked, he leaned, he touched dry lips to the cold forehead—and cried softly like a lonely child.

Yet even then an odd exultation began to rise in his heart. If this is the fate of man—to break loose from all things, and risk all on the tremendous peril of the Unknown, why wait till death to do it?

Through slanting sleet, over the black lot, and toward lonely street lamps and the lights of Olson's house, Eddy made his way; he was brimmed with the excitement of bearing great news.

"Oh, Fran," he thought, "you'll open your eyes at this!"

He tramped up the stoop, stamped on the mat, opened the lower door, climbed the steps. She heard him coming, flung wide the upper door, and cried:

"You're late, Ed!"

Her dark, pale face, in the half-light, was passionate with relief.

"Yes," he said, quietly, "but I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?" she snapped, sensing something tremendous in his tone.

"It's father. . . ."

"Father?" She had expected something else.

He almost smiled.

"Got a stroke. . . ."

"And now—now?" Her voice thrilled with a sort of tragic pleasure. After months of gray days, at last something red and bleeding. What though it was tragic?

Then to his amazement—and hers—he gave a lurch forward, buried his head on her shoulder, and sobbed hoarsely.

"Dead, Frances—he's dead."

She hugged him convulsively, then helped him into the warm dining-room.

Then he turned, seized her, whispering strangely:

"Frances."

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to wait till I die."

"Eddy," she cried, "what do you mean?"

They stared at each other, exultation in their eyes. Again he saw the woman who crouched over the flaming furniture.

"You mean"—she was breathless—"we'll—leave here—go *West*?"

"Yes; lumbering, anything—man's work."

And so nine years and a barren future were set on fire and sent blazing to the four winds. For they had learned from death to take risks.